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How YWCA finally got Elm Centre's groove going

Women persevered after banks rejected affordable housing plan

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As Canada's largest – and oldest – agency serving women and girls, you'd think the venerable YWCA would get some respect.

But when the Toronto office approached the banks for a \$37 million loan to build the city's largest affordable housing project in a decade, the women hit a brick wall.

"We were a group of women in a room facing a group of men," recalls CEO Heather McGregor, who oversees the association's \$23 million operating budget and 330 unionized staff. "When women are asking for money, the credibility issue is always there."

The banks never delivered.

But the YWCA is showing that women who work in social services can manage money and wear hard hats, too.

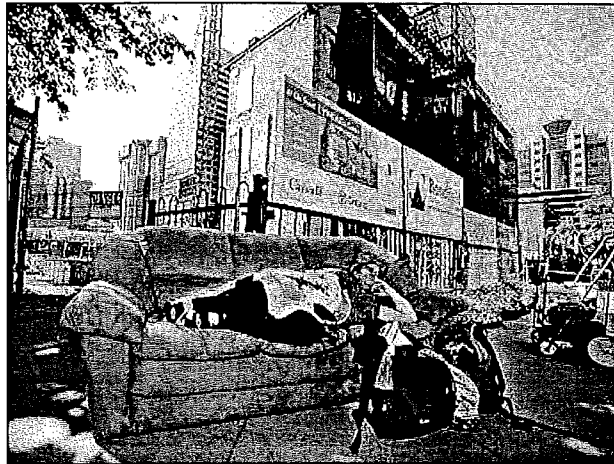
Tomorrow, McGregor will join Toronto Mayor David Miller and other supporters next to a 2,487-square-metre hole in the city's downtown to formally launch construction of the YWCA Elm Centre.

On the sidewalk, an art installation featuring a shopping cart, an aging automobile and a tattered sofa will tell the tales of women in the city who sleep on the street, live in cars with their children or on the couches of friends due to the lack of supportive, affordable housing.

Of the 70,000 people waiting for affordable housing in Toronto, more than half are women, many of them single mothers. When the \$80 million, 300-unit project is complete in early 2011, it will be home to women escaping poverty and family violence; living with mental health problems and addictions; and struggling as aboriginals.

The three-tower complex that will house the YWCA's local and national head offices also promises to be an environmental leader. It will include five green roofs, two rooftop gardens, energy-efficient electricity and one of the largest geothermal heating and cooling systems in North America.

Infrastructure Ontario, flush with federal funding, stepped up to the plate last year with a \$37 million mortgage. Combined with \$38 million in federal, provincial and municipal grants and loans, the YWCA was able to break ground on the ambitious project in January.



TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR
The shopping cart and worn sofa of Raine Lillefeldt's art installation — on the site of a 300-unit housing project being built by the YWCA at Elizabeth and Elm Sts. — are meant to evoke the experiences of women who live on the street.

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But the agency is scrambling to raise the remaining \$15 million in one of the toughest economic climates in a generation. "To say it hasn't been easy is an understatement," says Joan White, YWCA director of housing and support.

The last time the YWCA – or any other non-profit agency – built an affordable housing project of this size in Toronto, all construction and long-term operating costs were covered by government.

But those programs were cancelled in the 1990s. Now, those wanting to build affordable housing have to cover part of the cost themselves through fundraising or mortgages. And they remain on the financial hook for decades.

To meet the challenge, the Toronto YWCA has launched the largest fundraising campaign in its history.

Remember, this isn't the Y that owns squash courts.

The only thing close to a recreation facility owned by the Toronto YWCA is a girls' summer camp on Georgian Bay it has owned since the 1930s, White notes.

The YWCA's focus is on advocacy, employment and housing programs to help vulnerable women and girls. Last year, it helped more than 26,000 girls and women through more than 40 programs offered at 12 sites in the city.

The Elm Centre project got a huge boost this year with a \$5 million gift from the estate of deceased newspaper baron Ken Thompson and his sister Audrey – believed to be the largest private donation to a social-services provider in Canada. The women have also managed to raise another \$6 million in multi-year donations. But they are still \$4 million short.

People aren't used to donating money to social housing projects, says Sharilyn Hale, the YWCA's director of philanthropy. They don't have the cachet of hospital wings or university buildings.

Mental health and addiction can also be a hard sell for fundraisers. And some potential donors have questioned why the YWCA is building on expensive downtown property and not taking advantage of cheaper land in the suburbs.

Hale is unapologetic.

"The downtown shouldn't be the exclusive home to affluent condo dwellers," Hale says. "There are many low-income women working in downtown hospitals and office towers who deserve to be able to live near their work, too."

One-third of the Elm Centre's 300 affordable units will be reserved for women with mental health and addiction problems. And 50 will be earmarked for families of aboriginal women, including 10 for those fleeing violence.

Through a partnership with the Jean Tweed Centre, one of Canada's largest substance-abuse and gambling treatment centres for women, the YWCA will provide on-site support crucial to helping this vulnerable population stay healthy and housed.

The project's social mission blends perfectly with the site's historic past as the 1848 House of Industry, Upper Canada's first homeless shelter. The city bought the site bordered by Elm, Elizabeth, Edward and Chestnut Sts. in 2005 and invited the community to submit proposals the following year.

White and Hale believe the discovery of an abandoned baby in a stairwell at Nathan Phillips Square in the winter of 2003, and growing concern about homeless women unable to care for their children, gave the YWCA's proposal an edge.

A sympathetic ear in the mayor's office probably helped, too. "This program shows what's possible

and what we can do," says Miller. "Coming from a background of the only child of a single mom, it's particularly important to me that there be housing for women. It's one of the reasons, emotionally, why I've always supported this project."